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Q&A: Cameron Tommey '10, Director, Legal and Program Compliance, U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities

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Cameron Tommey '10

*Director, Legal and Program Compliance,
U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities*

BY LINDSAY NIEDRINGHAUS '07

Cameron Tommey graduated with a B.S. in earth and environmental sciences and a minor in Latin American studies. After graduation, he worked in Guatemala as a Compton Mentor Fellow. He attended law school at Washington and Lee University before returning to Greenville in 2015 to take a job at the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities.

Are you a lover of nature or the law? Which comes first for you?

CT: Nature. I grew up hiking and camping and being outside. Being in nature is the closest thing I have to religion. When I'm away from people, development, noise, pollution, artificial light—that's when I can think the most clearly. It's regenerative, cleansing. I need that time by myself to solve problems, make decisions, think clearer, reboot.

So I knew I wanted to do something to protect nature



for others to appreciate it as much as I do. It wasn't until I had an internship with the Endowment that I understood how I could pursue this environmental passion in a different setting other than, for example, forestry. Every day, I'm working to conserve forests and watersheds and create new markets for materials that help to sustain the nature that I love so much.

Law school wasn't easy. And I'm not talking about the studying; of course that was difficult. More difficult for me was being in that cutthroat, academic environment 24/7. I can't go for long periods of time without going for a hike or a trail run, and it was difficult to fit that in during law school. So every semester during reading days, I would rent a cabin in the woods to get away from the insanity. I could mentally check out for a few days then. Also during that time I was growing a long beard, which was funny because I'd disappear for a few days into the woods by myself, come back for exams wearing flannel and sporting a long beard, and everyone would be like, "Where have you been?!"

I have friends who tell me that they can't go a day without talking to people. They need that interaction. I'm the opposite. I rejuvenate being alone.

So was it a straight path from this internship to your position at the Endowment now?

CT: Not at all. While interning at the Endowment, I told the CEO, Carlton Owen, that I might be interested in interning for the Conservation Fund

in Washington, D.C. Carlton picked up the phone, and the next thing I knew, I had a paid internship with them the next summer.

That internship was a bit of trial by fire, considering I didn't have any background in law, yet I was working in legislative affairs. I basically had to learn what Congress was before I could even work on the first assigned project. But that didn't intimidate me; it's been a theme throughout my career so far. I'm thrown into environments in which I have a keen interest, but I don't have a background in them. It's an inherent curiosity. So I have to do a quick study and make do with what I can learn at the moment.

It's a common assumption that many Furman alumni have perfectionist tendencies. You seem to fit this mold. Do you ever find that your need to do everything perfectly can sometimes slow your progress?

CT: Yes, I am a perfectionist, but I don't let that define me. My experience in the White House's Council on Environmental Quality taught me how to keep this in check.

My first project, I was told that I had done a terrible job even though I felt like I had worked really hard on it. But it wasn't an option to quit. I told myself, "You worked 10 hours on this. You need to work 20 hours on the next one." I was determined to succeed there, and I felt pressure to do so, which sometimes really wore on me. While in the White House, I confided in another classmate who had worked there for a few years.

His response was, "This is what you signed up for." He was right. For better or worse, there's no room for emotions in a presidential administration. The world literally moves on.

That clerkship taught me to have a thick skin and to let some things roll off my back. I'm definitely still a perfectionist, and I believe that my work is a reflection of myself, but I also don't let that perfectionism paralyze me from moving the objective forward.

The recent election has brought forth very polarizing views, and it appears that the new presidential administration will be less supportive of environmental causes. What's your take on the current political landscape, and what does this mean for your work at the Endowment?

CT: Well, first, the Endowment isn't a governmental agency. It's a public charity established at the request of the governments of the United States and Canada. We've been endowed with funds under the terms of the Softwood Lumber Agreement. So we'll continue to operate as usual despite the change in administration. We do partner with many governmental agencies, though, like the Environmental Protection Agency, so project funding could change depending upon the status of these agencies.

I think the main issue with the White House these days—no matter who is in it—is this fight for power versus real policy. In general now, politics equate to power. And

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humans are innately hungry for power.

That's why even though I someday see myself working at the national policy level in D.C., I don't think I could ever work in another presidential administration. I want my love of nature to always drive my work—not power. At the Endowment, I'm surrounded by people who spend their free time hiking, kayaking, trail running . . . It's obvious that their love of nature supersedes all else. I want to be in that environment. I'm the type of person who has to believe in what I'm doing and know that it's making a difference.

So what are you doing right now with the Endowment that's making a difference? What makes you excited to go to work every day?

CT: I manage a portfolio of what are called Program Related Investments, low-interest loans with very favorable terms that both advance our mission but also provide some financial return. The Endowment has invested in a number of start-up companies across the country that are trying to develop technologies to use wood in new and innovative ways. My involvement with these projects involves quite a bit of travel, but I find it incredibly exciting to make site visits and see these technologies in person—like turning wood chips into natural gas that can fuel a bus, or transforming wood to be used as a cleaner, more sustainable alternative to coal in existing power plants. This makes my work very tangible and gives me the sense that I'm having a broader, lasting impact. ●